

# Classics and Politics

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Is classics relevant to politics today? Or does it occupy its own 'ivory tower', removed from the real world? On one level, the study of the ancient world is concerned with cultures that are necessarily distant in terms of both time and (unless you are lucky) space. Many classicists even enjoy the distance from contemporary life that the subject can offer. On another level, though, classics is all around us: ancient sculptures in the British Museum collections, classical influence in neo-classical architecture all over the country and in many great works of English literature, in the stream of good and bad documentaries about classical culture on television, and in films like *Gladiator*.

In Italy and Greece classical culture is part of everyday visual experience: drinking a coffee with a view of the Athenian Acropolis or the Pantheon at Rome gives people a very personal experience of classical architecture. In these countries, the history of ancient Greece or Rome is taught in all schools and becomes part of people's consciousness of what it means to be Greek or Italian. We might compare the way that Stonehenge, Hampton Court and Shakespeare's plays contribute to contemporary British identity.

However, there is undoubtedly a huge gap between us (whether British, Greek or Italian) and the classical world. We moderns need to *interpret* classical texts, pot paintings, sculpture and architecture in order to make sense of them. This is one of the reasons why classics is so interesting, why it demands so much creativity. It is also a reason why the subject does not have to end when the last papyrus has been edited and the last archaeological find has been unearthed! The process of interpreting this classical material can go on for as long as people find it worthwhile and meaningful.

However, this need for interpretation, which is fundamentally a point in favour of Classics, can also allow for the misinterpretation and misuse of classical culture by political regimes, and this is what I shall concentrate upon in this article.

## The importance of being ornate

This was done very effectively by right-wing military dictatorships in Europe in the 1930's. These included the regimes in Italy and Greece, led by Benito Mussolini and Ioannis Metaxas respectively. In addition to tailoring schoolbooks to glorify the achievements of their ancient ancestors, both Mussolini and Metaxas used impressive visual techniques to make links with the classical past. In Greece, for example, military parades included people dressed as ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek heritage was linked to Metaxas' contemporary military regime; dissidents were treated as traitors not only to the government but also to this heritage. Later, during the Greek civil war of 1946-1949, the right-wing government forces 're-educated' left-wing prisoners partly by forcing them to build models of the Parthenon. The curious irony that the Parthenon was created under a radical democratic political system was no obstacle to this way of thinking.

In Rome, Mussolini instigated an ambitious programme of excavations together with the reconstruction of ancient monuments and the creation of impressive vistas. His purpose was to emphasise the culture of imperial Rome and to assert its continuity with Fascist Italy. So for example, the Ara Pacis (the 'altar of peace', built for the emperor Augustus), was reconstructed from countless fragments, while at the same time a number of

ancient and Medieval buildings were cleared away for the construction of the grand *Via dell' Impero* for Fascist ceremonial parades. Explicit links were made between the ancient Roman empire and contemporary Italy: North Africa and Greece were to be reconquered, while Mussolini was presented as the new Augustus. In 1938 Mussolini opened the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* ('Augustan Exhibition of Romaness'), in celebration of the bimillennium of Augustus' rule. Hitler was present at the opening, and visited the Ara Pacis and the Colosseum amongst other places.

## Dorians in grey

In Greece and Italy there was an obvious opportunity for claiming the achievements of ancient Greeks and Romans, and using them to promote contemporary regimes. This was not the case with Nazi Germany, which only just squeezed into the corner of the classical world. In fact, as the Roman historian Tacitus shows in his essay *Germany*, the Romans considered the German tribes to be barbarians, threateningly (if on occasion admirably) primitive.

And yet the classical heritage was linked to Germany in an ingenious way. Already in the nineteenth century, German classicists had used the ancient Greek myth of the arrival of the Dorian tribe from the North to claim that the ancestors of the Germans were themselves Dorians! In this way, it was claimed that contemporary Germans embodied the 'true' Greek spirit. At the same time, the opera composer Richard Wagner linked Germanic myth cycles to ancient Greek culture by composing opera trilogies based on the model of ancient Greek tragedies. His opera house in Bayreuth was based on the architecture of the open-air theatre at Epidaurus, in Greece.

The Nazis made particular use of the racist theory of a Dorian super race. Athletic images of ancient Greeks (with which German museums teemed) took on a new meaning and were linked to the ideals of racial superiority and military strength. From 1936, the German Archaeological Institute in Athens was headed by Walther Wrede who was also head of the Nazi organisation in Greece. It was under his auspices that excavations were re-opened at Olympia. This was surely no coincidence, as Olympia was considered the place where the Dorians settled, and was of course associated with physical excellence and competitiveness through the Olympic festival. In the same year, the Olympic games were held in Berlin, in the presence of Hitler and the Nazi leadership. For the first time the Olympic flame was lit in the ancient sanctuary at Olympia and transported to the Olympic stadium in Berlin. In this way Hitler presented Germany as the true heir of the culture of ancient Greece, literally the modern 'torchbearer' of the flame of Greek culture.

Hitler also made use of classical heritage in his public building programme in Germany, and here the influence of Rome plays a bigger part than that of Greece. Although the war prevented most of these plans from materialising, models of the buildings were made and reveal the extent to which they drew on Greek and Roman architecture. For example, Hitler's architect Albert Speer made plans for a vast 'People's Hall' to be built in Berlin, which was modelled on the Roman Pantheon, only that it was to be 'bigger and better'. The entire city of Berlin (which was to be renamed 'Germania') was to be restructured along north-south and east-west axes, a feature which characterised

Roman town planning (the *cardo* and *decumanus*).

Whereas these plans were never implemented, Speer did build the Zeppelinfeld where the Nuremberg rallies were held in the 1930's. According to the architect this structure was inspired by the Great Altar of Pergamon, which was (and still is) housed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. There are also classical precedents for the way in which spectators were organised in the Zeppelinfeld. Thousands of demonstrators and spectators were arranged in strict hierarchical order, not unlike the way that spectators in the Roman Colosseum were seated according to social status and gender. Furthermore – and returning to Greek models – the Zeppelinfeld was visually transformed into a Doric 'temple of light' by shining columns of light several kilometres into the air.

### **De profundis?**

To us today this might all seem like a horrific (or ludicrous) misunderstanding and abuse of classical culture. But did the right-wing military dictatorships of the 1930s recognise a real aspect of classical culture? My answer would be yes. In both Greek and Roman culture military prowess was a publicly celebrated virtue, something we can see most obviously in imperial Rome. A military dictator could find a plausible model in the figure of the Roman emperor, who was chief commander of the army and undisputed head of state. Imperial Roman building programmes which used space and sculpture to impose political and cultural regimes have much in common with the building plans of Mussolini and Hitler. And the theatricality of Roman triumphs, parades and gladiatorial games was recognised by both the Nazi and Fascist regimes as an essential feature of effective choreographed marches and public demonstrations.

Acknowledging that classical culture contains some extremely unattractive elements can be disconcerting. As classicists we spend time with the ancients, in our imaginations at least. Reading Pliny's letters, for example, we might feel that we know the man intimately. It is hard to accept that he owned slaves and ordered the torture of people accused of being Christians. Of course classical culture also includes elements which we prize today: Athenian democracy and Roman cosmopolitanism are but two. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from the kind of insights that the dictators of the 1930s had into that same culture.

One reason why the dictators of the 1930s were able to use classical culture so effectively for their own causes is that it includes an enormous variety of attitudes and ideas. You can find more or less whatever you are looking for. So, for example, while the Parthenon was used by the right wing Metaxas government as a symbol of nationalism, it was also used by left wing protesters against the military junta of 1967–1974 as a symbol of freedom and democracy. The classical heritage is highly flexible.

### **The ballad of reading Greats**

In the 1930s, classicists and archaeologists colluded with the Greek, Italian and German dictators in presenting the classical world in a way that bolstered repressive military regimes. They were not irrelevant academics: they played an important (though hardly attractive) political role. This was either done actively, for example by constructing racist theories which connected ancient Greeks and Germans, or passively, for example by failing to question the politically motivated abuse of classical culture and scholarship. With the benefit of hindsight we can see this clearly today.

But what about the relationship between Classics and politics today? Must we remain sensitive to the use and abuse of classical culture in modern political discourses? Earlier this year, the

USA and its allies went to war against Iraq. No doubt for a variety of reasons, which I do not wish to enter into here. But it is worth noticing that American justification of this plan included the defence of freedom and democracy, ideals that are commonly (although not of course exclusively) associated with ancient Greece. The conflict was presented by some people as one between Islam and the values of the 'West'. This rhetoric draws tacitly (but powerfully) on the idea that 'Western civilization' owes its origins and many of its ideals to classical culture. When military action is authorised by a 'Senate' and conducted from a building rich in classical allusion then classical culture is very much alive in our world. Whatever your view on contemporary politics, classics is not irrelevant: it is still a central part of the way in which we understand the world. It is up to classicists to keep a check on those ways.

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